

**From:** Poorni Iyer [<mailto:visalam21@comcast.net>]

**Sent:** Friday, February 06, 2015 8:50 AM

**To:** HSSframework

**Subject:** Improper Treatment of India and Hinduism in Instructional Materials for California Students

Dear Dr. Thomas Adams,

We are writing as parents of our biracial children attending schools in the San Juan Unified School District, and practicing Hindu residents of California. The existing account of Hinduism in all the current California approved social science text-books is lacking in accuracy, authenticity, and sensitivity.

The core problem is both curricular and pedagogical. From our standpoint, the treatment of India and Hinduism in California schools is not satisfactory. When the frame of reference is the prism of prophetic religions, it is often difficult to conceptualize an unfamiliar philosophy and so, the path of least resistance is to simply reduce a complex historical narrative to a single, supposedly defining aspect of the religion—the caste system.

At the outset I would like to mention that the word 'caste' itself has its origins in a Portuguese word of 'casta'. It is not reflected in the appropriate Indian term/s of 'varna' and 'jati'. Further

1. Caste of course is now a legitimate legal category in India (as in Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes and Other Backward Classes namely SC/ST and OBC) and enshrined in the Indian constitution as part of affirmative action. We cannot understand the Dalit movement without the basic acknowledgement that India became a caste-society especially during the colonial period. Hence there is no problem with a discussion of caste in India in school textbooks as long as it is done in proper context, and in a way that makes sense to young people.
2. This is why Varna (social stratification, essentially based on temperament and profession) and Jati (birth) should be discussed along with caste. All societies are hierarchical and so was society in ancient India. Caste arose as a recognition of social hierarchy and was not always a prescription for social hierarchy. On the other hand, India did not have institutionalized slavery as in Egypt, Greece or Rome. Hinduism as a set of beliefs and practices originated in a society that was explicit about social hierarchy and the ritual status of social groups.
3. However, Hindus have both embraced and rejected caste for centuries. Buddhism and Jainism rose as response to Brahminical hegemony and ritual hierarchy. Parallels can be drawn between Christianity and Judaism in this regard. Further, the Bhakti movement (Nayanars, Alvars, Virasaivas) emerged in the South in the same way, challenging caste. Sikhism in Punjab did the same and several saint philosophers can be added to the list in northern India such as Mira, Kabir, Namdev, Raidas, Ramdas, Dadu to name a few.
4. Hinduism should not be seen only through the prism of caste, but caste should be discussed as ONE aspect of Indian social hierarchy.

Neither the California standards nor the narrative offers to address the multifaceted Hindu understanding of God, Gods as in the pantheon, and worship and leaves those details to the textbook writers and classroom instructors to address, or not. Without proper guidelines for discussing the religion, the one topic of caste dominates the texts, distorts the presentation of Hindu philosophy, and leaves no room for any substantive description of the religion itself.

The California textbooks do not present Hinduism as a living faith in a historically accurate manner. The result is that ALL our children leave their sixth grade social studies classes on Hinduism unaware of the true nature of the religion. In particular, the practicing Hindu child is left confused and possibly ashamed of their religion and Indian heritage. Depending on the demographics of the class, this can result in the child being bullied and taunted by some of their classmates, which leads to insecurity about their own faith and identity. We don't believe that this was the intent of the California Education Department but it is actually occurring. The fact that there is virtually no opportunity to talk about Hinduism or India after 6<sup>th</sup> grade (or before that) has the unfortunate effect of reinforcing this sense of insecurity through rest of the child's school experience.

Per the definition of the scholar, Edward Said, *Orientalism is the colonialist presumption that Europeans are the experts and the peoples they colonized are not qualified to define themselves*. The 19th century Orientalist construct of India is this: Invading Aryans subjugated the native population, and Aryan Brahmin priests imposed their language, religion and the caste system upon them. We find that the California textbooks perpetuate these stereotypical and Oriental perceptions of Asians in general as rather strange and exotic.

When schools are intentionally, or unwittingly, used as an apparatus to shape young students' minds with colonial perspectives, problems do arise. In many California communities Asians and Hindus of Indian heritage form a significant part of the community and these ideas hurt the self-esteem and emotional well-being of our young Californians. In our present world, having experienced the violent aftermath of such practices, it is unconscionable to let such practices continue. Historians and texts in the Social Studies area serve an important role to educate and inform our populace.

In order for the textbooks to meet the California state standards for evaluating instructional materials for social content, and the *Education Code* Sections 51501, 60040(b), and 60044(a) and (b) for ethnic and cultural groups and Religion, investigating how the differences between Asia and the Europe/US are constructed in textbooks is considered imperative to the learning process. What kind of perceptions and positions are American readers encouraged to take up with regard to India? The textbooks should not represent Hindu India in a manner that inscribes, maintains, and reinforces inaccurate colonial messages, as they currently do. But rather, they should seek to clarify the living nature of the religion and include the significant contributions and achievements of Hindu-India in world history that are currently absent. This is a serious omission that needs to be addressed.

Now that you have heard from several parents and concerned Californians on the subject, in addition to bringing the matter to your attention, this letter is to serve the purpose that you have been told how we feel on the issue and we have also offered up suggestions how this may be done. Hence we expect that you will take necessary steps to rectify the issue.

Sincerely,

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